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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 000738

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SUBJECT: GROWING SADC ENGAGEMENT ON ZIMBABWE

REF: LILONGWE 361

Classified By: political section chief Matt Harrington. Reasons: 1.5 (B) and (D).

SADC presidential mission

1. (C) South African High Commissioner to Zimbabwe, Jeremiah Ndou, confirmed to the Ambassador on April 14 that President Mbeki is planning a joint visit to Zimbabwe with President Muluzi on April 24, as reported reftel. He expressed concern that the Angolans -- who should be taking the lead as SADC chairman in the search for a solution to Zimbabwe's political crisis -- might resent the Muluzi/Mbeki initiative, and ensuing bickering within SADC might complicate the proposed mission.

2. (C) Ndou offered his view that only a SADC effort at the head of state level stood any chance of alleviating the Zimbabwean crisis; foreign ministers, he thought, would be able to achieve little of substance. To be successful, he continued, any SADC mission to Zimbabwe ought to present a list of specific verifiable demands, most for the Government but some for the opposition MDC (including dropping its court challenge of the 2002 presidential election). Ndou believed the ideal composition of a SADC mission would be the heads of state from the Troika (Angola, Malawi, Tanzania), plus Presidents Mbeki and Chissano. The Ambassador emphasized the importance of South African participation, saying it was the SADC country with the most leverage, noting recent press reports of ESKOM's growing impatience with Zimbabwean non-payment of its electricity bills.

SADC task force

3. (C) The planning for an Mbeki/Muluzi visit is only the latest development in recent SADC efforts to address SADC's problem child. On April 3, 10 SADC foreign ministers gathered in Harare under the rubric of the SADC organ on defense, security, and politics. According to Tanzanian High Commissioner Alexander Muganda, the group wanted to focus primarily on Zimbabwe but Harare blocked it, devising a broader agenda which included a range of SADC-related issues. In the end, the SADC foreign ministers did hold a five-hour "off the record" discussion with Zimbabwean Foreign Minister Mudenge, which Muganda described as "frank." Muganda said he had not attended that small session but that Mudenge was, in the open session meetings, in typical deflective mode in the face of a barrage of questions from his colleagues about the situation in Zimbabwe, refusing to engage in a genuine assessment of events on the ground. While in Harare, Mozambican Foreign Minister Simao was unusually blunt, telling assembled journalists that "Zimbabweans are not living in peace and harmony...We are concerned and because of this, next week a task force should be coming to Zimbabwe to deal with the situation...We have an obligation to overcome the difficulties Zimbabweans are facing." Subsequent efforts to arrange a SADC task force visit by foreign ministers have been hindered by a Zimbabwean government determined to delay and control the process to the extent possible, according to Muganda.

4. (C) South African High Commissioner Ndou did attend Mudenge's April 3 closed discussion on Zimbabwe with his counterparts, and he told us that Mudenge was franker than usual in acknowledging problems in that conversation. Whenever he strayed from the party line, however, Mudenge emphasized that he was expressing his personal views.

Comment

5. (C) It is unclear whether the Muluzi/Mbeki initiative will displace the effort by SADC foreign ministers or complement it. We strongly agree with Jeremiah Ndou's assessment, however, that active engagement by SADC heads of state stands the best chance of convincing Mugabe to step back from the brink. Mugabe's arrogance and substantial ego would prevent genuine engagement with foreign ministers, and ensure that any visit at that level would produce little more

than the usual anodyne statement. He would at least listen to fellow heads of state, albeit with a keen awareness of his own seniority to all but the Angolan. We also agree that SADC leaders must come prepared to hold Mugabe's feet to the fire on a specific list of concerns. Mugabe will take advantage of any fuzzy arguments or uncertainties of the facts on the ground here to quickly divert the conversation to extraneous topics, such as the unfairness of the Lancaster House agreement, the centrality of the land issue, or Harare's relations with London.

SULLIVAN